



Gerry under the Cloud 9 Hammer

Surf's Up

Luigi Bernas shoots the breeze with **Gerry Degan**, the man who put Siargao on the world surfing map

It's a rare man who uproots himself from the comforts of home and follows where his heart takes him. Australian Gerry Degan did exactly that in 1995 when he set foot in Siargao, then virtually an unknown island in Northeast Mindanao. Beguiled by waves perfect for surfing, Gerry, a graphic designer by trade and a surfer by inclination, ended up staying on the island with his wife, Susan. More than a decade later, the couple, along with surfing buddy Naoki Nakata, run the Sagana Resort, one of the first and most successful resorts in the area. Gerry is also perennial choice of the surfing world's largest commercial sponsors to oversee international competitions held in the Philippines, including the forthcoming Billabong Cloud Nine Invitational Open slated for September 23-30. The upcoming surfing competition will feature 44 top surfers from Australia, Hawaii, Indonesia, Europe, and the Philippines, which will be fielding eight local surfers. *Travelife* talks to Gerry about surfing, living in paradise, and other life-altering matters.

How did you find yourself in the Philippines?

I was born in Boston, Massachusetts and my family migrated to Australia when I was three years old. And when you get to Australia you end up being a surfer because that is what

everybody does. With Aussies, it's almost a rite of passage to travel for a year either before or after university. So I went to Europe for a year and focused on surfing more than anything else. Then, at one point, I was working in Sydney and my wife Susan was in Europe visiting her relatives, and we decided that we'd meet somewhere halfway. We checked the map and since I knew that there were waves here, I said, "Let's go there." This was in 1995.

How did you end up in Siargao?

No one I knew had heard of Siargao, but I'd heard of Cloud 9, whispered in quiet circles, and I wanted to check it out. We came to the Philippines, stayed in Siargao for two weeks, then traveled to different places—Bohol, Camiguin, the south. Then I said to Susan, "I'd really like to go back to Siargao." This area where the resort is now was all jungle and there was no electricity. People didn't want to come here. They said it was haunted by a *wak-wak*—Siargao's version of the boogeyman. Pregnant women aren't supposed to walk around at night in this area because the *wak-wak* will get them.

During that visit, we met a Japanese surfer named Naoki Nakata. We were all staying in small *nipa* huts in General Luna and we surfed together every day. One night we had this big

discussion about changing our lives and building a resort... Personally, I thought at the time it was the Tanduy talking (*laughs*).

We had a wonderful two months here, made friends, and then it was over. We went back to Sydney. A couple of months later, I got a phone call from Naoki—he was on his way to Australia to tell us that he'd made a deposit on the land we'd discussed building a resort on. He asked, "Do you want to come in and go into business with me?" Susan and I looked at each other and after five minutes, I said, "Yeah, let's go for it." The worst that could happen is we invest the money and things fall apart. But here we are after 12 years. We've done it, we're relaxing, we go surfing every day, which was the plan.



Gerry, daughter Lily Toshiko, and wife Susan

With countries that have more developed surf industries, like Australia and Hawaii, how do you sell a surf destination like the Philippines?

We have the quality waves here and that's the most important thing. Surfers are pretty adventurous and they will travel

wherever the wave is. You sell it on the fact that the waves are really good and aren't super crowded, and on the fact that the people here are friendly and inviting. My wife would never want to live in a surf destination if she didn't feel welcome. And it blows me away that even after 10 to 12 years of increasing tourism, the people here are super-duper friendly. None of this jaded I-want-your-money stuff that you get in Indonesia, where a huge majority of traveling surfers go. Guys who come here for the first time say, "I'm never going back to Indonesia." If it wasn't for the negative travel advisories in the Philippines, I think the place would be exploding already.

Do you lose some percentage of your

business because of these advisories?

Without question! We're full three or four months of the year, but if there were no trouble warnings, we'd probably be full every day of the year! I get to go surfing every day, so it's not the end of the world for me. But if I get to make some money at the same time, that would be nice.

Siargao Surprise

How a non-surfer found herself in another kind of cloud nine

Traveling anywhere off-season was never my style. But when a good friend invited me to visit Siargao Island in his hometown of Surigao del Norte, I had to ask: What does one do in an island known as the "Surfing Capital of the Philippines" when one has never surfed except on the Net? Plenty, as I later found out.

The trip to Siargao Island proved to be overwhelming for a first-timer like myself. First I had to fly from Manila to Butuan for an hour and a half. Then I had to travel by land from Butuan to Surigao del Norte for two and a half hours. Then I had to ride a cargo/passenger boat called a *ro-ro* for four hours. And finally, another road trip from the pier to General Luna (where the cluster of resorts occupy the beachfront) for 30 minutes.

But the journey was worth it. The trip by sea was highlighted by the Del Carmen Swamp, home to one of the largest mangrove forests in the country. The *ro-ro* ride too was an eye-opening experience. I overheard a bunch of foreigners speaking in Surigaonon, Surigao's dialect, and they were so fluent that it made me feel like an outsider. Observing them talk candidly with the locals—what an unusual sight (and sound)!

Locals sell their catch of the day right by the pier. I was tempted to buy a pail full of huge, soft, succulent shellfishes called *libuo* and a kilo of baby ferns called *pako*. A little farther down is the only wet market within the island's total land area of 62,796 hectares, so if you intend to

cook during your stay, you should buy ingredients from here before you head to General Luna (known as GL to locals).

The road to GL is a combination of paved and uneven roads so expect a bumpy ride. One can ride a tricycle for P35 per head or hire the whole thing for P100, one way. The island also has motorcycles called *habal-habal*, which is a longer version of normal models from the city and can accommodate more passengers. It's P50 per head or P500 for half a day.

I finally set foot in the relaxed, serene environment of Bayud Resort. Here I found solace. No wild waves, only soft ones lyrically breaking on the immaculate, white sand. The amazing view and the variety of seashells on the shore tempted me to indulge in hobbies such as photography and shell collecting. Instead I totally immersed myself in the "Art of Doing Nothing" that the term "laid back" became a total understatement. I whiled away the time lazing on the beach, catching up on lost, precious sleep, curling up with a good book, and mixing with the locals and foreigners for some good conversation and a drink or two.

Now that I'm back to the hustle and bustle of city life, I sometimes find myself, with eyes closed, reminiscing every detail of my Siargao trip. I start to hear the chirping of seafaring birds, the sound of soft waves, the wind blowing in one solid direction. I even start to feel the white fine sand beneath my feet. Yes, the memory of this magical island is so vivid, it is as real as the air I breathe.—*Irene T. Gonzales*

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Tell me more about the Siargao locals—how do you find working with them?

They're friendly, warm, fun, and inviting. When I came into this town, I was welcomed with open arms. The locals were very helpful; no request was too much. A lot of foreigners come here and they hang out with the locals. We've got as many local friends as we have foreign friends. For me, I don't really care if I'm hanging out with the fisherman's son drinking Tanduay, or hanging out with the governor's son drinking scotch in an air-conditioned house.



Sagana Resort's native huts give a rustic vibe

Is that sentiment shared by other resort owners?

Some of them aren't necessarily as involved in the community as we are. They go surfing, they go to their resorts, and they don't do anything else. We're not like that. We get involved with the local community, with our staff and their families. You can't come to someone else's country and then isolate yourself. You've got to meet the town, you've got to meet the people. Personally, I think they're missing out.

How much does the local community benefit from the rise of surfing here?

I would say it changed Catangnan, our local barangay, a lot. There's not one family there who isn't working directly or indirectly for tourism. But there are good changes and bad changes. One of the good changes is that the locals used to quit school early to fish or work the rice fields. And they drank or used drugs. But now, they're focused on surfing, into getting healthy, which is really good. The downside is they just want to go surfing and not go to school. So surfing brings good and bad—but there's a lot more good than bad. There's trash removal now, the roads are better. They're doing it for the foreigners, but the locals benefit as well.

Has per-capita income gone up? What about employment?

There's no question that income per capita has gone up and unemployment is way down. When I first came here, you could get a carpenter for P120 a day; in 10 years, it's gone up to P400 a day now and there's not enough carpenters. There's so much construction going on now that it's hard to get workers. I even find it hard to get girls to work in the restaurant because they're all in a resort somewhere. Around 80% more houses have electricity now because people have money to pay for it. They are building nicer houses, putting glass on the windows, and buying motorbikes—there are literally hundreds

more motorbikes in the town. Without surfing, these people wouldn't have these things, and their lifestyle would continue as it was. Some people would say that life was better before, some people would argue that you can't beat progress. I don't know, but the place has changed dramatically in 12 years.

If you had the power to dictate Siargao's future, what would you do?

It's hard to answer that without sounding quite selfish. I'd like to limit the number of resorts and not go crazy building new resorts. If I were the local government, I'd fix the infrastructure and waste management—the two biggest issues. The rubbish gets picked up once every month at best, and they'll pick our rubbish, but they won't pick up the locals' rubbish.

And then there's the difficulty of traveling in a country with 7,107 islands. People need to know that it isn't going to take three days to get to their destinations—they have limited time off. If someone tells them, "You gotta fly to Manila, then you gotta fly to Cebu, then you gotta get a boat, then..." they'll say, "I'll just go to Indonesia because I can fly straight to Denpasar Airport and I can be surfing in an hour and a half." Seair flies Mondays and Fridays and that's very helpful, although they may have to put in a third flight as the season gets busier.

Then there's the issue to coordinate the plane with the boat—the plane will land and the ferry would have left 10 minutes before, so people will have to spend the night in Surigao. No one has ever seen the importance of this.

So where do you go from here?

We still love it here. It was a really good time when we said, "Let's pack up and go." It was exciting—we were moving to another country, the tropics. We were going into the unknown. Now, it's our home. ■